

Gender Savagery in Guatemala

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On the outskirts of Guatemala City the body of an 18-year-old woman of indigenous ethnicity was recently discovered by her frantic parents who had been searching long and hard. Forensic evidence showed that she had been repeatedly raped and tortured and that her head had been severed from her body with a blunt knife while she was still alive.

This killing was more than just a passing aberration. Nightmarish crimes against women have been occurring with horrifying frequency in Guatemala. In the last seven years, over 3,200 Guatemalan women have been abducted and murdered, with many of them raped, tortured, and mutilated in the doing. The number of victims has shown a striking increase in the last few years with some six hundred murdered in 2006 alone.

The victims often are from low-income families deracinated from their rural homesteads during the civil war and forced to crowd into Guatemala City and other urban areas in search of work.

We might recall Guatemala's horrid history of violence. From 1962 to 1996, a popular insurgency was defeated by that deranged murder machine known as the Guatemalan Army, trained, advised, financed, and equipped by the United States. A United Nations-sponsored Truth Commission in 1999 characterized much of the counterinsurgency as a genocide against the Mayan people, a holocaust that left 626 villages destroyed, approximately 200,000 people dead or disappeared, including many labor union leaders, student leaders, journalists, and clergy. Hundreds of thousands more were either displaced internally or forced to flee the country.

Those years of untrammeled massacres provide some context for the current wave of femicide sweeping the country. The 1996 peace accords officially declared an end to the butchery but the war against women continues albeit in more piecemeal fashion. Guatemalan women are enduring the whiplash of decades of dehumanizing violence---boosted by the same kind of deep-seated sexism and gender-specific crimes (rape) that are perpetrated in many societies around the world.

Independent investigators charge that the vast majority of present-day atrocities against women have been committed by current or former members of the Guatemalan intelligence services. Having escaped prosecution for human rights violations during the internal war, these trained

killers are now members of private security forces or police and paramilitary units that have been strongly implicated in the crimes of the last seven years.

For the most part, authorities show little inclination to bring the perpetrators to justice. Some officials blame the victims for their own deaths, implying that the women bring it on themselves because of their supposed involvement in gang activities or drugs, or because in some way or another they refuse to lead properly conforming lives within the safe confines of a traditional family and community.

Some of the victims indeed may have been entangled in shady operations. But many more have been working women, including those of indigenous stock, trapped in poverty. They are the prime victims of a broader "social cleansing" that reactionary hoodlums are conducting against a variety of groups including street children, teenagers, gays, and homeless indigents, a campaign that has claimed thousands of additional victims.

Guatemala is known as the country of "eternal spring." Some analysts have called it the land of "eternal impunity," given how right-wing thugs continue to get away with rape, torture, and murder. Statistics reveal that hardly one percent of the perpetrators are ever tried and convicted and the sentences are outrageously light.

Even those rare cases that make it all the way to a prosecutor's desk have little chance of resulting in a conviction due to the lack of reliable evidence. Recent reports reveal the continuing failure of investigators to collect and preserve essential evidence from crime scenes. More than ordinary incompetence is operative here. Guatemalan authorities manifest little interest in training skilled cadres who might unearth really damaging information about who is behind the crimes.

Anonymous death threats have been sent to the volunteer exhumation teams that locate and examine the bodies of the murdered women and who try to publicize the evidence they discover. In May 2007 the leader of one such team was informed that his sister would be "raped and dismembered into pieces" if he continued to investigate the crimes.

While these murders may seem like little more than random thrill killings to some observers, in fact they serve a function of social control much as would any form of state terrorism. The violence perpetrated against individuals creates a pervasive climate of fear and horror within the victimized families and communities, thereby discouraging social protest and popular resistance. Instead of organizing around any number of crucial politico-economic issues, many of the demoralized and traumatized families cower in stunned silence.

In time people grow numb to the violence. Feeling helpless they almost routinely check the news each day to see how many additional victims have been reported. The effects on children can be especially telling. Growing up in a climate of fear, they learn that their parents and community cannot keep them safe and that homicidal fury might strike anyone at any time.

Family members of murdered women report that authorities show hostility towards them when they request government intervention.

Guatemala's legal system is rife with provisions that minimize the seriousness of violence against women, a system codified and enforced by men who have seldom displayed any concern for the safety of women. The Guatemalan Penal Code long reflected this bias, treating domestic abuse as a minor offence and generally offering scant protection from gender-based violence.

Guatemalan president Oscar Berger voices a commitment to confronting the crisis but has done next to nothing. Rather than devoting the necessary resources to investigation and enforcement, Berger appeared on national television in 2005 to announce that, for their own safety, women would do best to stay at home.

In 2005 Guatemala appointed its first female Supreme Court President, Beatriz De Leon, and two years later a female police chief. But there is little indication that high-placed female officeholders are going to buck the Old Boys network. Until the government makes some significant efforts towards implementing the recommendations outlined by human rights organizations (such as Guatemala Peace and Development Network, MIA, NISGUA, GHRC-USA, Rights Action, and Center for Gender Studies), the lives of Guatemala's women will hang in the balance.

There are some encouraging signs. The Human Rights Committee of the Guatemalan Congress is giving serious consideration to a bill that purports to guarantee life, liberty, dignity, and equality for women along with stiffer penalties for those who physically and mentally abuse women and otherwise violate their rights.

Meanwhile a growing number of Guatemalan women are moving into nontraditional careers. In the upcoming election, at least one hundred women will be running for Congress. Some parties have designed campaign strategies intended to promote electoral victories for more women. At present of a total of 158 seats in the Guatemalan Congress only fourteen are occupied by women.

There also are efforts by human rights organizations to create a central, unified database of femicide victims, as well as an emergency response system for missing girls and women that would include utilization of state-of-the-art internet capabilities, DNA testing, and the like.

Awareness of the atrocities has been reaching other countries and gaining international attention. There is a growing demand from abroad that Guatemalan law enforcement agencies get serious about responding to the gender-based atrocities. The U.S. Congress is being pressured to get into the act. A House resolution condemns the murders and expresses condolences and support to the families of victims. The resolution urges the government of Guatemala to recognize domestic violence as a crime, and to investigate the killings and prosecute those responsible.

The U.S. Senate passed a resolution calling on the Guatemalan Congress to approve the actions of the U.N.-sponsored International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala. The commission intends to investigate the clandestine groups that use violence to advance their illicit political and financial interests.

Meanwhile innocent and unoffending women continue to suffer nightmarish fates at the hands of misogynistic maniacs who, some years ago, developed a taste for inflicting rape, torture, and death "in service to their country."

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